

# The Art and Politics of Ecology in India

## A Roundtable with Ravi Agarwal and Sanjay Kak

TJ Demos

This email conversation took place over the spring and summer of 2012. Ravi Agarwal is an artist, environmental activist, writer and curator. Sanjay Kak is an independent documentary film-maker whose recent work investigates ecology and resistance politics. Both are based in Delhi.

**TJ Demos** Sanjay, you've made several films that engage ecological and political crisis, the resistance and creativity of disempowered tribal peoples, and the undemocratic collusion of corporate and state interests in India. There's *Jashn-e-Azadi* (2007), which investigates the deadly conflict in Kashmir; *Words on Water* (2002), which looks at the issue of big dams and their negative social-economic effects in the Narmada valley; and *In the Forest Hangs a Bridge* (1999), which documents the community-based construction of a suspension bridge in the forest hills of the Siang valley of Arunachal Pradesh. What aesthetic approaches have you employed with these works, and how do they address the various crises?

**Sanjay Kak** In the film on the Narmada valley the aesthetic choices were dictated by my immersion in what was a remarkable people's movement, a mobilization that involved Adivasi tribals, mid-level peasantry, urban intellectuals and students. There was a constant flow of people around us, protests, demonstrations and rallies, and the image-making was a response to that. It was not unmediated, obviously, because in India we have a long tradition of 'activist' film-making that reflects precisely such events. (The Narmada movement alone has been the subject of at least six films before I made *Words on Water*!) And sometimes being immersed in the flow also meant being temporarily marooned in a still backwater, stuck in a remote village, cut off by the waters of the monsoon-swollen river; there was then time for the quieter, more reflective image-making.



Sanjay Kak, still from *Words on Water*, 2002 (The rising waters of the dammed Narmada river drown the fields of Jalsindhi village, 1999)

In the case of the Kashmir film, an approach was perhaps imposed on us by the conditions themselves, in what is a very disturbed situation, an oppressively militarized context, where fear was a very real part of the landscape. How does one use the tools of documentary verité in a world where speaking truth carries so much danger? Boxed in by these circumstances, we found ourselves moving towards an abstract style, in both the visualization and the structuring of the film. We arrived at a form that uses certain visual codes and repetitions to evoke the moment, to evoke the fears and the suppressed history of Kashmir. Most importantly, there was a deliberate decision to take Kashmir's fabled landscape – you know the trope: if there is heaven on earth, it is here! – and turn it into a burden. So that when you do – sometimes, rarely – have to face that landscape, the audience should want to turn away from it.

**TJD** You also recently provided a series of photographs that were used to illustrate Arundhati Roy's recent book, *Broken Republic* (2011), which investigates the Adivasis' quest for social justice and democratic process in relation to the state's attempts to transfer land to corporate interests in the state of Chhattisgarh.<sup>1</sup>

**SK** The still images taken in *Broken Republic* are very different in their origins. Shot in central India, in Bastar, they were taken with a tiny digital compact which, with almost no telephoto capabilities or viewfinder, imposes its own limitations on the kinds of pictures you take, on the relationship with the people you are making images of. But those limit-

1. See Arundhati Roy, *Broken Republic: Three Essays*, Hamish Hamilton, London, 2011.

ations also give a certain coherence to the pictures. The lens and the technology are only part of what goes into the response to a situation. One is reading into the material, trying to understand it, even as you are walking and shooting and making images of it.

**TJD Ravi**, what do you see as the central environmental emergencies or matters of ecological concern facing India today?

**Ravi Agarwal** There is so much happening and trying to create an overview is complicated, maybe even impossible. India is on an economic growth path (to which all major political parties subscribe). It has been growing its GDP between seven per cent and nine per cent over the past twenty years, up from the earlier three per cent. This entails many changes, such as the conversion of land use from agricultural to industrial, concentration of investment in urban clusters, a massive demand for energy, air and water emissions and pressure on groundwater and river systems. The official goal of this change is poverty reduction. While economic poverty has arguably fallen during this time, it has also led to massive displacements of people, violence, and growing inequalities and an intolerance of any form of dissent. China is often seen as the ideal, and in many quarters democracy is seen as a bottleneck to growth.

In this situation, environmental resources are being privatized in the name of efficiency and productivity, since the public sector has failed to deliver on these counts. The environmental crisis has been precipitated



Sanjay Kak, *Red Bhumkal*, from *Broken Republic*, 2011 (Against a backdrop of images of the martyrs of the guerrilla army, an Adivasi of the People's Militia, his hand-made gun in hand)





Ravi Agarwal, *After the Flood*, 2011 (The remnants of silt left behind by the receding monsoon flood waters in the river Yamuna in Delhi)

by the new capital-led growth in the country. Examples are many: mining permits in protected forests as well large-scale illegal mining – practised through a corporate–politicians nexus, with businessmen often becoming politicians; police violence to quell any form of protest against nuclear and steel plants; permits to build ports in protected coastal areas, introducing massive changes to existing conservation laws; corporatization of agriculture with a marginalization of small farmers, leading to farmers' suicides; groundwater crisis in urban clusters; a several-fold increase in car density and an astronomical rise in urban land prices (inward migration in cities like Delhi is actually on the decline owing to the high cost of living); an immense pressure on river systems, leading to moves to carry out destructive interbasin transfers through an interlinking of rivers, etc.

SK Ravi's summary of the multiple environmental emergencies we face in India is an accurate one. I would like to add a further framework. This new phase of capital expansion has its origins in the colonial model. In the nineteenth century what Britain needed most from Central India was timber for the rapid expansion of the colonial railway system, and labour to clear the undergrowth for the empire. This current phase of rapid growth and unprecedented accumulation is also only possible when there is a colonial hinterland that allows massive and unchecked extraction. It's not a coincidence that the fastest growth and greatest profits are coming from those



Sanjay Kak, still from *Words on Water*, 2002 (A protest rally by the fisherfolk and farmers of the Narmada river welcomes anti-dam protesters for the 'Rally for the Valley', 1999)

elements in the Indian economy that are directly linked to extraction: mining and minerals, iron ore, bauxite, coal. And these are the sectors with the heaviest toll on the environment. This is the case with China too, is it not? It's just that its more avowedly authoritarian structure has done a better job of concealing the fact that its incredible growth is being paid for by a huge toll on its ecology and by its poorest people. While the people in Mumbai and Delhi can't get their eyes off the glitter of Shanghai and Guangzhou, it's left to the people of the Narmada valley, where a series of big dams have destroyed a river valley, to look towards the implications of the Three Gorges dam in China.

**TJD** You mention the practice of 'unchecked extraction' by industry – isn't that one key to the politics of ecology (as for example articulated in Indian physicist and environmental activist Vandana Shiva's recent notebook for Documenta 13, *100 Notes – 100 Thoughts*, No. 012: *Vandana Shiva: The Corporate Control of Life*), as it brings out the undemocratic relation to land use in India where multinational corporations – whether Indian or transnational – are granted mining rights without regard for the social and economic implications of the tribal peoples living in these areas, putting profit before people? In this sense, neoliberalism is colonialism by another name, and we can see the exploitative results of globalization here.

**SK** Colonial extraction continues into the present day, it's just that it wears different robes. In our times, with the flows of global capital

being what they are, what's the difference between a 'foreign' multinational, and an 'Indian' multi-national? Take Vedanta, the mining giant that is currently involved in an epic battle against the Adivasis in the Niyamgiri hills of the state of Odisha, in eastern India. It's a multibillion dollar company, owned by the billionaire Anil Agarwal (no relation to Ravi!), a company registered in London, and with businesses all over the world (Mr Agarwal is worth \$6.4 billion). Or the Tata group, worth \$100 billion, based in India, involved in a major stand-off with the people of Kalinganagar, again in Odisha. (They also own Rover and Jaguar and Tetley Tea.) Or steel giant Arcelor-Mittal, registered in London, but owned by the Indian billionaire Lakshmi Mittal (worth \$20.7 billion). We also have Essar and Jindal. We could make a long list of so-called Indian companies involved in mining and metals, all of which are part of this process of unchecked extraction. That doesn't mean that the global mining conglomerates are absent – we also have Rio Tinto, De Beers and AlCan who've been around for a long time, just keeping a low profile, and letting the 'Indian' compatriots do the spadework for them!

**TJD** How can one respond to such ecological emergencies artistically, especially when up against such huge corporations and private–public collusion?

**RA** In some ways it has to become personal. I've had a long engagement as an activist, trying to speak about irresponsible corporate power and people's vulnerabilities, and also having to endure long and exhausting court cases against me. As part of my art practice I try to address some of these urgent concerns, for example, through my work on the river in Delhi (eg *After the Flood*, 2011, and *Alien Waters*, 2004–2006), and on the farming of marigolds (*Have You Seen the Flowers on the River*, 2007), and in the documentation of labour in Gujarat (*Down and Out: Labouring under Global Capitalism*, 1997–2000), which is locally situated but reflective of the global capital flows and new global imaginations. I see these as deeply interconnected, not caused by some 'foreign hand', but as an internalization of the idea of a global identity. *Have You Seen the Flowers on the River?* deals with the idea of sustainability, documenting the journey of the marigold from the small farmer fields of the river Yamuna in Delhi to the 200-year-old farmers' market in Old Delhi where until recently they were sold daily. (The market moved in December 2011 owing to the city's new 'beautification' drive.) Through photographs, field notes, videos and an installation, over a period of four years (2007 to 2012), I attempted to show a sustainable life in the middle of a densely populated city. The farmers' land is now being slowly acquired for new development, owing to exorbitant land prices caused by the recent 'globalization' of the city, even as the city works under the banner of 'sustainability'. The work questions if sustainability is only found through creating 'new markets' or if it already exists in people's lives and is more about an idea and way of life. And 'sustainability' is being interpreted by all (corporations, governments, NGOs) for their own uses. Both through my activist and artistic involvements, I am inter-



ested in it from a ground-up perspective of equality and rooted in the question of ‘what is a good life?’.

**TJD** Sanjay, in terms of developing a complex view of ecology, *Words on Water* offers a powerful example, and also works from the ‘ground up’. It does so by showing the lives affected by the great dam projects in the Narmada valley, presenting the flooded lands of tribals, physically locating their villages that are now submerged under water, and then placing those scenes in confrontation with shots of politicians such as L K Advani, India’s Deputy Prime Minister at the time, who is shown defending the building of the Sardar Sarovar dam from a pro-environmental position, and interspersed quotes from Supreme Court decisions that defend corporate development against tribals’ rights. You intervene at this point with a critical voiceover that is slowly articulated to stress the gravity of the situation, which says: ‘Words, trying to cement the fissures in this brittle hymn of progress that sings of benefits and is silent about costs. This is a dam that will submerge 248 villages and displace more than 400,000 people. Only half of them will officially count as displaced, and even they don’t really count.’ Can you talk about the intervention you see the film making in weaving together the differential ecologies of politics, economics and social life?

**SK** I see the struggle against big dams in the Narmada valley as a centrepiece in the development of a major strand in contemporary Indian politics, with a significance beyond that particular valley, or those thirty-odd dams. The success or failure of the Narmada Bachao Andolan (Save the Narmada Movement) in actually stopping the dams is important, but it’s not everything. From the mid-1980s the NBA was at the forefront of excavating a way of looking at issues of ecology, politics and economics, as if they were all interconnected, and they managed to do this with a very open platform, where people from all kinds of backgrounds were able to participate and contribute to the articulation of this argument. And, almost from the beginning, Indian documentary film-makers were engaged with mirroring these arguments and playing a part in how they were perceived. You have K P Sasi’s *Narmada: A Valley Refuses to Die*, 1990; Ali Kazimi’s *Narmada: A Valley Rises*, 1994; Simantini Dhuru and Anand Patwardhan’s *A Narmada Diary*, 1995; Anurag Singh and Jharana Jhaveri’s *Kaise Jeebo Re?*, 1997. These films provide such a fascinating account of a nation beginning to have a conversation with itself about development, power and justice.

To answer your question about *Words on Water*, whatever else it did, it certainly brought up to speed our collective understanding of the world in which the struggle was being waged, and reflected on what systems of justice were open to the poor and disadvantaged in India. For me, it began to reflect the growing disillusionment with the space available for Gandhian satyagraha as a weapon for the weak, and place a question-mark on the long-hallowed tradition of non-violent resistance in India. I think more than anything else the fulcrum of the film lies in the way the Supreme Court turned the people of Narmada valley away in 2000. Remember, the film was finished in the aftermath of 9/11, and it did suggest that we think about the consequences when ‘reasoned

non-violent protest is turned away', again and again. It questions the idea – and possibilities – of justice in our times.

**TJD** What kind of effectiveness do such films have in the wider debate?

**SK** The last two decades have been a very good time for the Indian documentary, and here I'm talking about the rapid construction of an audience for these films. It's not a conventional Western model of 'distribution' or built around TV sales, but there has been an explosion in the number of screening venues and the kinds of audiences that documentaries are reaching. And although the so-called 'activist' film seems to have an edge in terms of the speed with which it reaches its audience through political activists, every kind of film has its own carriers. All kinds of groups, including the student community, are part of this culture of screening docs, almost as if it was a part of the politics, not just a mediation. I certainly think that *Words on Water* was widely circulated, and was part of the debate, both in India and internationally. Effectiveness? Who can say...

**TJD** Ravi, the issue of sustainability was also part of the '48°C Public.Art.Ecology' show in Delhi in 2009, which assembled a number of art projects addressing climate change and ecology in public sites in the city (the show was named after the area's highest recorded temperature to date). What do you see as the exhibition's accomplishments, its lasting effects and limitations?

**RA** I think the project had two levels of impact. Firstly it helped open up the idea of public art and public space. Before the show, there was suspicion in the minds of the government about what this would be all about – would there be paintings in public, would there be direct critiques, etc. The show helped deepen the idea of contemporary public art (from sculptures and murals) as the artists explored different aspects of the city and used the idea of ecology in a broad sense. Secondly 'public space' itself was temporarily opened up, from being totally controlled and owned, to one where people could stop, see, talk and engage with the presentations and other people. However, this will take continuous work to change, for the tendency is to slip back to the older art gallery paradigm.

**TJD** Your project for '48°C', *Extinction*, concerned the near extinction of vultures in India, which are endangered, owing to the development of diclofenac, a painkiller drug for animal livestock used to maximise milk production, which enters the food chain of vultures through cow carcasses (as we learn from your piece). The drug clearly violates the basic principle of ecological precaution stipulating that if the effects of an alteration to the environment are uncertain, then it shouldn't be done.<sup>2</sup> As such, this ecological conflict has seen industrial farming and pharmaceutical production irresponsibly imposed on non-human systems. As a result over ninety-five per cent of vultures – a life-form that goes back some 100 million years – have died out on the sub-continent, forming one of 'the largest mass extinctions ever known in the recorded history of mankind', as you write in a note. For the exhibition, your project comprised photographic images and projections of images of vultures.

2. On the precautionary principle as part of a project of ecological sustainability, see John Cavanagh and Jerry Mander, 'Ten Principles for a Sustainable Society', in *Alternatives to Economic Globalization: A Better World Is Possible: A Report by the International Forum on Globalization*, Berrett-Koehler, San Francisco, 2004.



Can you talk about the workings of this documentary project deployed in public space?

**RA** I wanted to confront the city with what it had lost and what was absent. I think most people did not even realise that Delhi had a huge vulture population. Alongside I organized a public discussion on ‘extinctions’ and talks. I think this is a story of our times – when our footprint leads to stomping out other life forms. It’s a story of power and leading an unaware existence. I had many interesting encounters during the project, with cops, passers-by, taxi drivers, hawkers, etc. Many of them talked about the vultures they had in their villages and how they were not there any more. I think that such a project raises such an issue more publicly than say a gallery show or the media would. It has much potential if done with sensitivity and in a non-preaching way.

**TJD** How does ‘bearing witness’ within art and activist film and photography – which you’ve both practised in different ways – intervene in the general media culture, governmental positions and civil society in India?

**SK** I think the idea of ‘bearing witness’ sometimes casts us in a slightly confined role, as observers whose role is to record, and then carry away the images and sounds and words. My ideal relationship with the ideas that intrigue me is more fluid. That said, there is a word in Arabic, *shahid* or *shaheed*, which means both ‘witness’ and ‘martyr’ – and ‘beloved’. That’s the kind of complex relationship that I would suggest, where bearing witness also makes you a martyr to what you have seen, and where what you are martyr to is also the one you love!

**RA** Bearing witness is looked down upon as ‘only talking of the dark side in a rising nation-state’, but is also taking evidence of the ‘other side of the growth story’. In both cases the issue is peripheral as one which needs to be ‘resolved’, but there seems to be no space left for a real challenge to the central tenets of the current trends. The media, especially the powerful English-speaking media, is now increasingly controlled by corporate money – such as CNN/IBN (recently invested in heavily by Reliance, the largest corporation in the country), the *Hindustan Times*, one of the most influential daily newspapers (owned by the Birlas with large diverse business interests), and SUN TV (owned by the main political opposition party in Tamil Nadu). It supports solutions within the framework of ‘development’, but not outside it. Hence better water management will be supported, but anti-dam proposals will not be, or only in a perfunctory manner. The point is that everyone has bought into the idea of ‘development’ as the solution, and often has a stake in that model.

**TJD** What about the significance of alternative media cultures to contest this increasingly global society of control?

**SK** I have no doubts that the ‘alternative’ media culture is a very real thing in India. Of course its reach is still miniscule compared with the overwhelming power of mainstream media. But it’s able to goad and provoke the much more powerful beast, and affect public thinking in important ways. As the crisis becomes more pronounced, the validity and relevance of ‘activist’ intervention is enhanced. It starts by

embarrassing the mainstream by confronting its lies and obfuscations, and that creates a crack through which other broader solidarities can emerge. Arundhati Roy once likened the role of the alternate to the bees around the ear of the buffalo – the buzzing can drive the beast crazy, they don't even have to sting! I can see many issues that are central to our times where the juggernaut is being slowed down by ideas that first came out of the fringe.

There is an amazing diversity at work here: the internet, film-festivals, the little magazines, and now even Facebook and Twitter: people are using everything they can. Although the net was initially a sort of English-language domain, which has its own limitations, the past few years have seen a big push in the Indian languages, Hindi, Tamil, Malayalam, Odia. As a documentary film-maker I can say that India has probably one of the richest film screening cultures: there are dozens of activist groups and

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Ravi Agarwal, *Extinct*, Delhi, 2008, photographic installation showing vultures found in abundance in Delhi until recently, which have now disappeared from the city and are almost extinct in South Asia

film-festivals that screen documentary work, organize highly charged political discussions, and they do all this without giving in to the pressures of being absorbed into the funded, over-aestheticized world of 'film festivals'. Perceptions of the situation in Kashmir, for example, were hugely influenced by the way young Kashmiris started using blogs and Facebook and Twitter to tell the world what the mainstream corporatized media were not willing to, goading and provoking and shaming them into lifting the lid somewhat.

**TJD** Can you discuss the significance of working between artistic and activist contexts, in different sites of reception and with alternative media sources?

**RA** Artistic practices for me are informed by the same ideas that also inform activist interventions, though they may acquire very different forms. Artistic practices work in a frame of creating 'objects', which then become free-floating. Activist practices are rooted in specific issues and have an agenda of making an impact. For me artistic practices have the space for contemplation and reflection on complex issues and can evoke a different set of responses than activist work. I do not see artistic practices as 'functional' but as expressions. For me, both forms are very important and intermingle in subconscious ways.

The sites of reception have become more complex, with art/activist work intermingling in different spaces. My artistic work has found itself in galleries, museums, public spaces, etc. When I have engaged with public art as an artist or as a curator, I have attempted to think of the idea of 'publics' and the 'site' as a political location and to address specific discourses around the 'site'. For example, for the '48°C' show, my project *Extinction* was located outside the Natural History Museum. In a more recent curatorial venture, the *Yamuna – Elbe Project*, in October/November 2011, held in Hamburg and Delhi, the idea was to consider the relationship between progress and ecology in relation to the two rivers where both these concepts are present in different, yet similar ways. In many ways there is an institutional belief (held by engineers and planners) that progress will answer the question of ecology (the dirty Yamuna will become like the clean Elbe), but it misses the deeper current debates around de-engineering the Elbe to restore its ecology.

**TJD** How has the art world reacted to ecology in India?

**RA** That part of the artistic community which is interested in such an engagement seems largely passive, a little distant from the 'moment' and possibly more interested in the circulation of their work. I feel that many artistic practices which claim social engagement remain unrooted (or superficially rooted) in the actual social discourses and only float on the surface. Unfortunately there is often little real 'reading' of this by some curators/critics, where art as aesthetic is still the main concern rather than an 'informed' or 'engaged' aesthetic. It's almost as if ecology gives the art world some 'relevance'. I personally do not think this relevance is required by art, since I do feel it is relevant on its own, but it may be that the art world desires such relevance in a world which is so politically active and socially challenged today. I think there is room for a wider cross-disciplinary conversation in the domain of art.